

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

THESES OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Revolution and history: Tocqueville versus Marx

The relationship between revolution, history and freedom in the thought of
Tocqueville and Marx

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I. The purpose of the doctoral research

The doctoral dissertation compares Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx's views of the revolution in the context of the freedom and historical perception of the two authors. My dissertation intends to contribute to the research of the phenomenon of the revolution, which has fallen into the background in contemporary philosophy and social science. The choice of the two authors is justified by the fact that the central concept of the thought of both of them was the revolution, and to this day striking account of the revolutionary phenomenon can be read in the works.

II. Structure and results of the analysis

1. Revolution and freedom

According to the accepted definitions, the revolution is a (1) relatively rapid and (2) profound socio-political change, that (3) takes place with the participation of large crowds, (4) mostly through violent means, (5) aims to overthrow the government or (6) the existing political system or even (7) the whole socio-economic system *and* replace it with another. (Rebellion does not aim to establish a new system, just overthrow the old.)

However, there are mainly philosophical conceptions of revolution which define the notion of revolution with the concept of freedom. At first Condorcet used definition of this sort, in the 20th century István Bibó and Hannah Arendt, who argue that the definition of the concept of the revolution is essentially related to the fact that the revolution aims to create a more liberal political system. According to István Bibó, the revolutions aimed to promote European political and social development, which can be described by the process of humanizing power and embodied in the establishment of the system of liberties.

According to Arendt, the primary purpose of the revolutions was to create *constitutio libertatis* i. e. a free, constitutional system. However, only the American Revolution could reach this purpose, the others could not. For this reason Arendt made a distinction between two types of revolution, the American and the French type.

At the same time, both Bibó and Arendt faced the fundamental question of the fact that starting from the French Revolution, most of the revolutions instead of creating a more liberal political system, had only planted another tyranny replacing the previous one. Both of them believed that the reason for this controversy is that the French Revolution had set out such broader social goals that were not possible to achieve, and found the solution in maintaining

the revolutionary process and making the revolution an end in itself. These mistakes of the French Revolution were also made by the majority of the later revolutions. Both Bibó and Arendt had interesting perceptions about the phenomenon of the “professional revolutionary” whose aim is provoking and maintaining revolutions instead of establishing free political order. For Arendt certain revolutions (for example the Russian Revolution of 1905 or the Hungarian Revolution of 1956) were important because of the council system in which she saw the possibility of the participative democracy as the *sine qua non* of political freedom.

2. The concept of freedom from Rousseau to Marx

According to Benjamin Constant the Jacobins used a certain perception of freedom which in fact cannot be adapted to the modern age. This theoretical error traced back to Rousseau was the cause of the Terror. Constant made a distinction between the antique and modern concept of freedom where the antique type, also known as positive freedom, means the freedom in the common political affairs, while the modern concept of freedom, also known as negative freedom, is the primacy of individual freedoms, protecting them against state interventions.

Rousseau and Marx wanted to transcend the purely negative freedom as they recognized the positive freedom as the true form of freedom. The root of their concept of freedom is bourgeois and *citoyen* dichotomy: they believe that modern civil society serves bourgeois selfishness, and individual freedoms provide the legal safeguards for this selfishness. The true freedom can only be achieved through the abolition of the dichotomy and according to Jacobins sharing Rousseau’s views and Marx only through revolution.

Contrary to Rousseau and Marx, Constant, Hegel and Tocqueville sought to reconcile negative freedom and positive freedom. Constant emphasized the importance of citizen participation in politics while expressing the primacy of individual freedoms. According to Hegel, the reconciliation of negative (subjective) and positive (substantial) freedom takes place in the state, which guarantees the individual’s freedom rights and at the same time, assigns them to itself. Tocqueville, on the other hand, believes that the exercise of positive freedom, which he considers to be the same as self-government, is feasible in communities and political associations, and emphasizes the importance of this as a counterweight to state power.

3. The theories of society and history by Tocqueville and Marx

To examine the main topic of the dissertation, the views of Tocqueville and Marx about revolution, it is indispensable to describe their social and historical concept. Both Tocqueville and Marx are considered as the founders of sociology, however, their social theoretical

methodology was fundamentally different. Tocqueville regarded individuals, their beliefs and passions as the basis of social science analysis, that is, he was a methodological individualist. He also used ideal-typical concepts, for example “aristocracy” and “democracy” and drew important theoretical conclusions from the comparison of different countries or social formations. Marx inherited from Hegel his teleological thinking and historicism. In his social explanations he used the category of class not taking into consideration the level of the individual and the problem of the collective action.

They both acknowledged the historical progress, but while Tocqueville thought it is only a tendency-based process, we can witness the constant equalization of living conditions, Marx – following Hegel – thought that history has a predetermined purpose and understanding, which he identified with the creation of communism, and is necessarily striving towards this goal. At the same time, Marx did not assume the existence of a demiurgos of history, such as the Hegelic Spirit, and in the absence of this, he could not provide philosophical guarantee to achieve the goal.

Tocqueville’s book, *Democracy in America* states that the class differences in the United States are essentially negligible, as the vast majority of the society is made up of the middle class, there are few very poor and very rich people. High social mobility gives everyone the opportunity to ascend, which means there are virtually no social inequalities and the impulses arising from them, which could be breeding grounds for a revolution. American society is in a state of equilibrium where most people have private property, and are therefore against all kinds of revolutionary unrest. Tocqueville, in his work on American democracy predicated the decline of great revolutions.

However, in the France of *ancien régime*, there were very sharp class divisions that caused envy and hatred in members of one class towards members of other classes, and were the decisive reasons for the outbreak and violent course of the French Revolution. The class divisions did not disappear in mid-19th century France, only this time the difference between bourgeoisie and working class was sharpened, which was one of the reasons of the outbreak of the 1848 Revolution. Tocqueville, therefore, was much less optimistic about Europe and predicted the coming of social revolutions after political ones.

Tocqueville believed in historical progress, which he considered as a tendency-like process, equalization of living conditions, or the process of democratization. He believes that this process has been ongoing in Europe since the Middle Ages, while a democratic society was already established in America. The French Revolution is an important part of this process as it abolished feudal privileges and privileges of the nobility, thus creating legal equality among

people. While social development seems to follow a certain path, political development can proceed along opposing ways, so it is possible that liberal democracy or modern-day despotism will be the result.

The Marxian class theory is based on Hegel's account of the civil society. According to Jean L. Cohen the successive forms of Marx's class theory can be seen as unsuccessful attempts to transcend the Hegelian dichotomy of civil society and political state. Both Hegel's and Marx's class theory are pervaded by their philosophical convictions: as by Hegel the bureaucracy is the universal class, so by Marx is the proletariat. In Marx's early works the working class is the philosophical representative of the human emancipation and only by its revolution man can become communal being (*Gemeinwesen*) and free.

Marx outlined a two-class model according to which capitalism simplifies class differences between capitalist and wage workers. According to Ralf Dahrendorf, however, although the capitalist system at the time of Marx seemed to describe the structure of society well, it became inapplicable for the later stages of capitalism. Marx claimed that the basis of social conflict is class conflict and ignored other conflicts such as national or racial conflicts which tended to become increasingly important. According to Marx class conflicts can only be solved by class struggle and he could not imagine their peaceful solution. Although the Marxian class theory is untenable, the Marxian concept of class is important for modern sociology too.

Historical materialism is the Marxian theory of history whose most important elements are forces of production, relations of production and superstructure. The best reconstruction of this theory was offered by Gerald Allen Cohen in his book *Karl Marx's Theory of History. A Defence*. According to Cohen the history is determined by the development of the forces of production, and to the forces correspond such relations of productions which promote their development and the political-legal superstructure is to stabilize the relations of production. When the relations of production do not promote the development of the forces any more, social revolution comes about and the old relations are replaced by new ones.

Cohen's theory received a lot of critics by historians, philosophers and sociologists. According to the authors of *Reconstructing Marxism*, Wright, Levine and Sober the incompatibility between the forces and relations of production does not offer sufficient motivation for a potentially revolutionary class to transcend the old relations and establish new ones. According to Jon Elster the working class does not start to revolutionize in order to create a more efficient system than capitalism. In conclusion, Wright, Levine and Sober could accept only a weaker, indeterminist form of historical materialism.

4. Reflections on the Revolutions in France

Despite the various and sometimes conflicting approaches, the French Revolution was considered by the coeval authors as a decisive event that brought considerable change to European history, when it declared itself self-consciously as a revolution, for the first time, legitimized the overthrow of a political system not by reference to historical law, but referring to the human rights of man.

The debate unfolded between Price, Burke, Paine and Condorcet was largely about the interpretation of the three great revolutions of the Modern Age, the English, American and French Revolution. The conservative Burke argues that while the English revolution only restored the ancient rights of the English and the American revolution gave these rights to people overseas, the French Revolution, however, was moving away from history as the new political system was based on not the historical rights, but on the (alleged) innate rights of man. In contrast to Burke, such liberal defenders of the French Revolution as Paine and Condorcet argued that a free political system cannot be based on historical rights, but only human rights.

The thinkers of the German Idealism had more ambivalent approaches towards the French Revolution. Kant argued that the French Revolution was an important step in the historical progress towards freedom, however, he believed that the violent overthrow of political power cannot be legitimate. The later Hegel thought the real revolution was the Reformation, and the French Revolution was only an attempt by a Catholic country to create a similar freedom as the result of the Reformation on Protestant land.

According to Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and The Revolution* the French Revolution was a step in the historical process of creating equal living conditions, which needed to be violent because the ingrained feudal privileges and the escalating conflicts between the various classes made it impossible to establish a peaceful foundation and legal recognition of social democracy. He emphasized the phenomenon of centralization which is a decisive moment for his analysis, as long as it has allowed the sudden ruin of royal power and the rapid creation of a new political system in the old one's place. According to the so-called 'Tocqueville Paradox' revolutions do not break out when people's living conditions deteriorate, but on the contrary, when these suddenly improve because the increased expectations are not being met by the government.

According to Marx, the French Revolution was the process of replacing the feudal order with the capitalist regime, but it is difficult to fit the phenomenon of Jacobinism in this process. Therefore, Marx first recognized the controversy of Jacobinism as a whole over the French Revolution and took it as a temporary interruption of the process, but later resorted to an

opposing explanation: Jacobinism actually accelerated the bourgeoisie's access to power, while it was not the revolution of the bourgeoisie but the proletariat. This proletariat, however, despite its intentions (and according to the intention of 'history'), paved the way before the bourgeoisie. According to the first interpretation, the Jacobins suffered from a kind of 'political somnambulism' if they wanted to create similar society to that of the Spartans and Romans in modern conditions. This interpretation is based on considerable simplifications. The fact that the Jacobins would have been representatives of the working class does not stand because this class was in an undeveloped condition at the time of the French Revolution.

Despite the somewhat different points of view, Tocqueville's and Marx's perceptions of the revolutionary events of 1848 have surprising similarities in many aspects, inter alia, both drew attention to the social character of the revolution and the class conflict between bourgeoisie and workers, regarding it as the overture of social revolution. Both Tocqueville and Marx expressed their resignation in view of the results of the revolution: according to Tocqueville, the socialist-charactered social revolutions are an immeasurable threat to freedom, Marx argued, however, that the fall of the social revolution proved that the proletariat has not yet become mature enough to pass the socialist revolution that leads to genuine freedom.

5. The concept of revolution by Tocqueville, Marx, and Marxism

Tocqueville was sharply opposed to what he called 'revolutionary spirit' and was very similar in his political philosophical basis to Burke. However, in the assessment of the French Revolution, he disputed Burke. According to Burke, the renewal of France should have been based on the ancient constitution, while Tocqueville argued that the purpose of the revolution was precisely to destroy these ancient laws. According to Burke, the possibility of becoming a noble for citizens in the old order meant that the boundaries between the two classes were blurred, while Tocqueville argued that this only just strengthened these boundaries. Burke considered the revolution the work of a close clique, while Tocqueville argued that the conspiracy theories provide an improper explanation, and revolutions are triggered by long-term social processes.

The idea of the proletarian revolution has determined Marx's work from his very early works and despite the failure of the workers' uprisings (1848, 1871), he did not dismiss the hope of the victorious proletarian revolution. While according to Marx, the French Revolution only realized partial political emancipation, the full realization of human emancipation awaits the revolution of the proletariat. The social revolution of the working class ensures the realization of the community essence of people (*Gemeinwesen*). Marx, however, said very little

about the actual course of the socialist revolution and the new social and political system created by the revolution. One of these few is the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which he imagined as a transitional regime, but since he did not describe how exactly it would look in reality, later it provided opportunity for many different interpretations.

The possible motivations of the working class for the socialist revolution – the abolition of injustice, alienation and suppression – cannot be considered as revolutionary motives. According to Marx, justice is always a relative concept, there are no principles of justice over history, all social systems consider themselves to be righteous. Alienation, although an existing phenomenon, does not close the way out of a vital need, but 'purely' from the fulfillment of the human essence. This is also not sufficient motivation for the outbreak of the proletarian revolution. The Marxian thesis of the increasing impoverishment of the proletariat is not justified by history, so it cannot be taken into account as a realistic reason.

The Marxist concept involves another serious problem. To start a revolution, not only the motivation needed for the member of a group, but also the group must be able to solve the free-rider dilemma. If we only assume individuals following their own interests, the revolution will never break out, since it is in the interest of each individual to cooperate with others, and they themselves only enjoy the benefits of such cooperation. The cooperation and solidarity which are indispensable for a revolution can only be achieved if convictions of justice and morality motivate members of the group. Marx, however, dismissed these motives.

The idea of the socialist revolution has been increasingly left out from the toolkit of leftist thinking, starting from Engels, who says that under modern technical conditions no traditional revolution is possible. The Bolshevik takeover of 1917, however, brought about a fundamental change when it proved the possibility of the proletarian revolution's victory. (At least according to Bolshevik ideology, whose interpretation has been taken over by many Western Marxists.) Karl Kautsky was the one who most strongly disagreed with this view, getting into a serious debate with Lenin. In the debate, however, Lenin was able to use Marx's arguments more than Kautsky.

The process of citizenship, accelerating after 1945 in the West almost completely pulled the ground out of the Marxist revolutionary expectations. Herbert Marcuse noted this, who named groups outside the proletariat as possible actors of the socialist revolution; György Bence, János Kis, and György Márkus, in their Marx critique *How is Political Economy Possible?*, in the chapter about radical needs came to the conclusion that the radical needs needed to start the revolution did not arise in the members of the proletariat. After the collapse of the socialist systems between 1989 and 1991, the question of the socialist revolution lost its

importance, but after the financial crisis of 2008 regained it. For some important thinkers of the radical Left such as Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek the possibility of the socialist revolution is still a central question.

III. Publications related to the topic of the dissertation

Kiss, Csaba 2010. „A tökéen innen”. In *Elpis* 4. évfolyam 2. szám. 175–183.

Kiss, Csaba 2012. „Alexis de Tocqueville: Emlékképek 1848-ról” [recenzió]. *BUKSZ*, 24. évf., 1. szám. 69–73.

Kiss, Csaba 2013. „Az európai fejlődés útja és zsákutcái”. *Elpis* 7. évfolyam 1. szám. 151–157.

Kiss, Csaba 2014a. „Bibó István a szocializmusról és a marxizmusról”. *Elpis* 8. évfolyam 1. szám. 51–65.

Kiss, Csaba 2014b. „Ludassy Mária: Felvilágosodástól elsötétítésig. Politikafilozófiai írások” [recenzió]. *BUKSZ* 26. évfolyam 3. szám. 270–272.

Kiss, Csaba 2016a. „Hegel, Tocqueville és a szabadság két fogalma”. *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle*, 60. évfolyam, 2. szám. 129–143.

Kiss, Csaba 2016b. „Marx és Tocqueville a történelemről. A történelmi haladás szociológiai elemzése Jon Elster Marx- és Tocqueville-értelmezésében”. *Elidegenedés és emancipáció*. Főszerk.: Marosán Bence Péter. L'Harmattan, Budapest. 267–274.

Kiss, Csaba 2017. „Paradox egység”. *Elpis* 10. évfolyam 2. szám. 205–209.